

What do we do with the Past?

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ARGUMENTS AGAINST DEALING WITH THE PAST :

Scriptures Used to support the idea of ignoring or forgetting the past:

Argument 1: God doesn't remember our sins anymore; neither should we. (Psa 103:12, Jer. 31:34, Heb 8:12, 10:17)

Response: God chooses not to remember our sins and/or hold them over our head because he sees us through Christ's work on Calvary. The above verses quite obviously do not mean that God does not have the ability to recall our sins. If any of us were to choose to turn away and reject His atoning work, the justice of God would most definitely become retroactive. God would, in that case, choose to remember every one of our sins ever committed, and we would face the full consequences.

Argument 2: Paul said "forgetting those things which are behind" (Phil 3:13). We shouldn't bring up the past, because it is "under the blood".

Response: While it is true that our sins are under the blood, we must also remember to be like the Bereans (Acts 17:10-11). It is important that we get the context of Philippians 3:13. We really need to read the whole chapter of Phil 3. Also, count how many times Paul shared his testimony and the ugliness of his past life throughout the New Testament. He shared it frequently in hopes of bringing people to Christ, and so that he and others could grow in Christlikeness. Using this verse to refute the very thing Paul was doing in this chapter, and did so often throughout his ministry, really does not ring of truth and consistency.

Argument 3: He that looks back isn't fit for the kingdom (Luke 9:62). We are no longer fit for the kingdom if we deal with the past.

Response: First, if this verse precludes any interacting with any type of memory of wrongs committed, or of dealing with the past in any way, then amnesia seems to be the route to go. We have a major conflict between this scripture and

Matthew 18 (as well as other scriptures). How can we lovingly confront a brother (Matt.18, Gal. 6:1) whom we have observed wronging other people, if we are forbidden to look at the past? Matthew 18 teaches us that when we see a brother in sin, we are to care enough to do our part to bring a brother to repentance. However, this argument seems to imply that the scriptures tell us to “not think about the past ever again”. When applied in this way, even the first step of the Matthew 18 approach becomes impossible. You see, if this verse is talking about looking back at the past, as in our history (which it is not), then that idea must not only be applied to the idea of counseling, but to every other area of conversation and relationship as well.

Second throughout all of Scripture, we see God commanding us as his people to look back and remember (Eph. 2:11; Rev.2:5, Book of Deuteronomy, & many more). God is clearly not against looking back at our past life for the purpose of moving forward, staying true, or glorifying God.

What this verse *is* talking about is the looking back that the children of Israel did so many times in the wilderness. They looked back wished for the “leeks & garlics” of Egypt. They looked back with a desire to go back. Similarly, Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26). While the scripture does not say much about this incident, it appears that beneath her look back (whether a quick glance or longing gaze) was a desire to go back, to turn aside from obedience (see Luke 17:31-32; also see Matthew Henry). When we look back with a desire to return to where we were, it shows God and us where our hearts are at. In that case, it would be accurate to say that type of person is unfit for the kingdom.

In response to all three: when taken in context, none of these scriptures are addressing the issue of looking at the past with a desire to grow in forgiveness, repentance, and godliness. Further, we all agree that blame-shifting is wrong and we cannot allow that to be the reason for looking at the past. I concur that there is a danger of blame-shifting in looking at the past. When we deal with the past, we must bear in mind that blame-shifting was one of the first self-protective sins ever committed. As such, all mankind is very apt to commit it again. However, the very fact that there is one ditch (blame-shifting) seems to indicate the existence of the road (dealing with the past) and the second ditch (refusal to repent & forgive).

Common arguments used to support the idea of avoiding the past:

Argument 4: We are supposed to forgive and forget—

Response: Neither the phrase nor the principle is mentioned in Scripture. We find many scriptures instructing us to forgive. There is not a single verse instructing us to forget our hurts. There is, however, an element of truth to the forgetting part, in that we must choose to pay the price of forgiveness and not live life out of our hurts. If, when we are hurt, we are frequently reminded of a painful situation earlier in life, it is a good possibility that we have not gone very far on the journey of forgiveness.

Argument 5: I've confessed it, it's under the blood

Response: So from the moment I say, "I'm sorry God, please forgive me", no Christian can ever talk to me about any of my faults I've ever confessed? This could really come in handy the next time someone confronts me—or not. God's forgiveness never erases consequences for wrong-doing. Additionally, God's forgiveness doesn't necessarily equal repentance.

1 John clearly teaches that we as Christians are cleansed as we walk with God, yet it also says that His forgiveness comes as we confess our sins (1 Jn. 1:9). James 5:16 tells says "Confess your faults one to another and pray one for another that ye may be healed". We see that not only does God require action on our past sins, we also see that a healthy church will do so as well (2 Cor. 7:9-12). That action may simply be honest confession, or it may also include disciplinary consequences designed to pull the straying brother from the grips of sin. I've seen numerous individuals with huge patterns of sin in their life who've refused to discuss those patterns based on this false idea. Unless you caught them in the very act, it was already past and by that time it was "under the blood". Really, this very pious-sounding idea, when used to avoid talking about the past, is nothing more than a last ditch effort of self-protection to avoid having sin exposed in one's life—that would appear to be the same as what Lot's wife did when she looked back at Sodom.

Remember: We must look at the whole of Scripture, with Scriptures used in context, to determine broad biblical principles.

SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES IN SUPPORT OF DEALING WITH THE PAST :

Biblical directives on dealing with the past--

Principle 1: Our own hearts are very tricky—we need other’s input into our lives.

2Ti 3:16 All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

Jas 5:16 Confess *your* faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

Considering that the scriptures (Prov. 16:2, 21:2, Jer. 17:9-10, etc.) tell us numerous times that our hearts tend to deceive us about our own goodness, or our motives, how better to see our faults than by dialoging with our brothers about how we have lived life and related to God and others.

Principle 2: Bitterness, obvious or disguised, has powerfully destructive consequences; in the end, if unresolved, it brings eternal death.

1Co 11:27 Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink *this* cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

1Co 11:28 But let a man **examine himself**, and so let him eat of *that* bread, and drink of *that* cup.

1Co 11:29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

1Co 11:30 For this cause many *are* weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.

Heb 12:1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset *us*, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

Heb 12:2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of *our* faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Heb 12:15 Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any **root of bitterness** springing up trouble *you*, and thereby many be defiled;

Mar 11:24 Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive *them*, and ye shall have *them*.

Mar 11:25 And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

Mar 11:26 But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.

Mat 6:12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Mat 6:14 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:

Mat 6:15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The Big Question—Since the scriptures are quite clear on the result of unforgiveness (our failure to forgive others prohibits us from receiving God’s forgiveness), what will happen if the “many” who, as Hebrews 12:15 talks about, have that “root of bitterness” refuse to take a look at the past and deal with it? What if these **are** clear commands to deal with the sin & shame in our past and we refuse to do it? **Could hidden bitterness keep us out of heaven if we are willfully ignorant of that bitterness?**

Principle 3: Scripture instructs us to remember the past with the goal of glorifying God.

Eph 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Eph 2:11 Wherefore **remember**, that ye *being* in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands;

Eph 2:12 That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world:

Eph 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.

Rev 2:4 Nevertheless I have *somewhat* against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

Rev 2:5 Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

Read the entire book of Deuteronomy and count how many times God commanded his people to remember.

Principle 4: Scripture instructs us to work through the past with the goal of restoring relationships with God & others.

2Co 4:1 Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not;

2Co 4:2 **But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty,** not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

2Co 4:3 But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost:

2Co 4:4 In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.

When you go to the Greek definitions (the source of this research work was strong's, various Bible versions, and some Greek lexicons), the foremost meaning of the KJV word "dishonesty" is, quite simply, SHAME. Placed inside the framework of these verses, it is as if Paul is taking for granted the fact that every believer should "renounce the hidden things of shame".

Mat 5:23 Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee;

Mat 5:24 Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

Col 3:12 Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering;

Col 3:13 Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also *do ye*.

Closing Thoughts

1. Forgiveness is not an option, we all agree. Yet, personally, without people moving me to deal with my past, I would never have seen some ways I had buried bitterness in my heart toward people in my life, and even toward God himself. Even though I thought that I had forgiven, that bitterness was very much alive. In fact, even though today I am aware of those tendencies, the patterns I developed out of the bitterness continue, at times, to affect my responses. When this happens, I am forced to examine myself and ask God to show me if there is any more bitterness in my heart. As I further process the wrongs done to me, it gives me a clearer picture of how to forgive, not only in my words, but also in my actions. Even more importantly, it has given me a much deeper realization of the ways I sin against God and others. It has brought a deeper and more sincere repentance. It has helped to teach me lessons on humility. It has increased my willingness to hear how I fail in relationships. As a result, my relationships with the people around me have grown much closer.
2. The main issue really appears to be how far should we go back and how much do we deal with the past? That is a fair question, and there are no rules set forth in the Scriptures, beside the rules of truth and love. I like to ask this question: will the steps taken and the issues we work through (even though things may get messy for a time, even though sin might need to be exposed in myself or others) move others and myself into closer fellowship with God and each other? If the answer is “yes”, then it is clearly in harmony with God’s Word.
3. Each of us has an extremely hard time seeing our own sin. Ways I have put up walls (have you ever thought “am never going to let _____ do this to me again” or “I’m never going to let this happen again” or I’m never going to get hurt like that again”) and ways I have sinned against others (including hidden patterns of sin), become more apparent as we allow others to walk with us in taking a deep look at our own life. As that happens, we are able to both forgive and repent at a deeper level.

4. In working with bitter people, one of the best doorways leading to their bitterness & sin is the doorway of their pain. Take a look at Isaiah 53 & 61 as well as other scriptures. It is quite clear. Christ came not only to forgive our sin, but to heal our pain. It has been amazing to see locked up people moving out of their long-standing bitterness and sinful styles or relating (even though they may look so good) into wholeness and godly relationships.

5. The above scripture studies are by no means exhaustive. We would invite your feedback regarding the subject. If there are any critical scriptures which should be included in a study such as this, please email us at jsensenig.fs@gmail.com .